

Cascades of Southern Charm

By
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Picturesque Spanish moss symbolizes the quiet and relaxing charm awaiting visitors in South Carolina's Lowcountry.

Like a whisper that blows from ear to ear, the lore of Spanish moss survives like an old fable. She hangs in wisps of tangled streams from old Lowcountry oaks. Full of nostalgia, history and comfort, her cascades of willowy flowers spread a familiar sweet scent in the early summer nights that embrace you and say, stay a while. Here, in this gentle sentry of the South, you will find legend, shade and a quiet that sways from limb to limb.



She has answered to many names, Graybeard being the most popular. Centuries ago the term used by Native Americans meant “tree hair.” In mocking their rivals, French explorers dubbed her *barbe Espagnole*, or Spanish beard. The Spanish retorted with *cabello Francés*, or French wig. Her sprawling grace bristled at being the metaphor for disdain between South Carolina’s earliest explorers. Yet, despite the infringements on her honor, she endures. Not only as the dark backdrop to haunting tales and the tattered curtain of loves lost, but also as the blushing screen to loves won.

Hardly does one imagine the ghostly beacons of the “Gray Man” of Pawleys Island, or the specter of Beaufort’s Land’s End Light, without the moonlit moss. And legend has it the Spanish moss grows as a symbol of the everlasting but forbidden love between a Spanish soldier and an Indian maiden.

The beauty of the Cypress Gardens in Moncks Corner is never void of the moss’ blueish-gray canopy. And what respectable Southern plantation would be caught without a properly attired oak standing court by an iron gate?

All throughout Beaufort, Jasper and a far reach of counties lining South Carolina’s coasts and waterways, the air is moist, the sun rolls out a steady haze, and the Spanish moss is ever present. Through majestic lanes of hundred-year-old oaks just dripping with this hallmark of Southern repose, visitors are welcomed to the waterfront village of McClellanville. There, the down-home atmosphere merges with a long history of shrimping and fishing, quaint antique shops and museums brimming with the past.

Oh, she may swag wearily. But she is tireless, having served a greater part in history than many know. Over a century ago, moss was mixed with mud to make mortar for buildings that still stand strong today. The moss has been fodder for livestock and mulch for Sea Island gardens. At the core of the plant is a black filament that is exposed when the plant is ginned. According to author Todd Ballantine, in *Tideland Treasures*, “Henry Ford stuffed seats in his first Model Ts with this treeline upholstery.” Even a cool night’s sleep in the sweltering Lowcountry in the mid 1800s was credited to mattresses stuffed with the airy moss. Today, though less a commodity as in days gone by, the plant is still cured for handicrafts and serves a role in university studies on air pollution.

In truth, it is neither Spanish nor moss, but a perennial tropical air plant (epiphyte) that has no roots in actual soil. Formally known as *Tillandsia usneoides*, the plant is not a parasite, and only grows on the surface of trees and other plants for mechanical support. It absorbs most of its nutrients from water and food in the air through its stems and leaves.

No doubt science has its place. But in contrast to her misty glow in the early morning sun, fact must bow to the romantic charm of this Southern cascade. She’ll lull you with her rustle in the wind, and her promise to offer good mornings after every sleepy night. As centuries and legends have proven, she’ll never bid you farewell.

If You Go... You can find Spanish moss throughout South Carolina. To help get you started, here are some suggested locations.

Moncks Corner, SC — Cypress Gardens • 3030 Cypress Gardens Rd., Moncks Corner, SC 29461 • 843-553-0515

Beaufort, SC — Greater Beaufort Chamber of Commerce & Beaufort Visitors Center • 1106 Carteret St., P.O. Box 910, Beaufort, SC 29901 • 843-524-3163

Pawleys Island, SC — Georgetown County Visitors Bureau • 10744 Ocean Hwy., P.O. Box 2068, Pawleys Island, SC 29585 • 866-368-TOUR

Jasper, SC — Jasper County Chamber of Commerce • 123 B.E. Wilson St., P.O. Box 1267, Ridgeland, SC 29936 • 843-726-8126

McClellanville, SC — McClellanville Town Hall • 405 Pinckney St., McClellanville, SC 29458 • 843-887-3712